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To Act and Learn: A Bakhtinian Exploration of Action Learning

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Introduction

In 1996 Chia and Morgan offered the image of the ‘philosopher-manager’, arguing for the expansion of management education beyond the narrow concerns of social-economic activity toward an embracement of ‘the management of life in all its complexions’ (p.41). Action learning has in the past looked to the work of pragmatist philosophers such as Dewey or Peirce or critical hermeneutic philosophers such as Gadamer (See Gold *et al*, 2007).. In this paper we will add to previous attempts to integrate philosophical ideas into action learning theory and suggest that the ideas of the Russian social philosopher and cultural theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin can be used by those involved in action learning.

These new readings of the learning process are set in the context of the ongoing debate on the meaning of action learning (Pedler et al 2005), its many faces (Marsick and O’Neil 1999), what it is not (Simpson and Bourner 2007) and various stances (Boydell and Blanter 2007). Even the nominated originator of action learning, Reg Revans (1982) was loathe to provide a complete statement of its elements and operation. More a way of thinking and acting than a technique, there are some key features of action learning that many would recognise as basic. For example, a key premise is that learning comes about through reflection followed by action to solve real problems (McGill and Beaty, 1995). Such problems need to be significant for managers and attention must also be directed to the distinction made by Revans (1982) between puzzles and problems where the latter is concerned with messy,

intractable issues that resist easy solutions. They are what others have called ‘wicked’ problems (Rittel, and Webber, 1984). Other elements might include the importance of learning as a social process with a group of others, the set or ‘comrades in adversity’, who take action in the light of fresh understanding. And, crucially, action as the source of learning and learning the source of action. This paper discusses Bakhtin’s work and then goes on to consider the fresh perspectives on action learning which a Bakhtinian analysis may offer.

We will be using data gathered from a recent action learning programme for SME managers in the north of England. The Programme involved over 100 managers in 16 sets in a variety of configurations. There were two women only sets and also an ethnic minority business group. There were also several groups focusing on start-ups. The project involved six universities over a 12 month period (See Clarke *et al* 2006). We completed an evaluation of the project for the North West Development Agency. Some of the data we collected during this evaluation exercise will be used to examine the key features of Bakhtin’s work in relation to action learning. Our intention in doing so is to create new understandings of action learning for academics, facilitators and for learners themselves.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin

Bakhtin was a Russian social philosopher and cultural theorist, born in 1895. While not a Marxist, Bakhtin lived and wrote during the Soviet era, enduring periods of exile where he produced some of his most important work. During the 1970’s, western academics were able to gain access to this work and translate it for western audiences. Since that time, Bakhtin’s work has provided a key source of ideas and new ways of talking, mostly in the field of literary critique, but increasingly among more diverse arenas of understanding. According to the Bakhtinian commentator, Michael Gardiner (2000), a key theme of all Bakhtin’s work is that:

‘the values and meanings that most directly shape our lives emerge from the existential demands of daily living and our immediate interpersonal relationships.’ (Gardiner 2000, p.43)

One of the most significant features of Bakhtinian understanding is the attention given to life as a continuous series of acts or events. As individuals, we have an unending need to make sense of the world and make our lives meaningful. In attempting to achieve this requirement, Bakhtin highlights that, at any moment in time, we occupy a position and participate in a 'once-occurrent Being-as-event' (Bakhtin 1993). Thus, we experience life 'concretely', where what we call our world is 'seen, heard, touched and thought'. Indeed, as long as we live, we cannot escape such an experience; we have a 'no-alibi' within it. As life proceeds in a continuous series of acts, what is experienced by us can only be experienced by us; to that extent our Being-as-event is unique to us and cannot occur again. However, such experiences are also shared with others and the way it is shared has been referred to as Bakhtin's Dialogism (Holquist 1990). In the next section, key Bakhtinian themes are examined and narrative data collected from learners reflecting on their experience of working in a set are used to exemplify them.

Language as a mediator of learning

Action learning is concerned with people who are facing challenges, opportunities or problems that do not lend themselves to quick solutions. The essence of action learning is to find a way of moving forward, to act and learn, with people empowered by the process of working with a group of peers or 'comrades in adversity'. The action learning process is mediated within the set by a dialogue that is promoted through insightful questioning. Thus, one of Bakhtin's principal contributions - the primacy of language and its mediational role in providing meaning – can be used to understand and how learners create and re-create new meanings for themselves. These new meanings may eventually lead to action which itself becomes the focus for further learning.

Making Meaning

'All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language.'

(Bakhtin 1986, p.60)

According to Bakhtin, what we do with language is use it in our different activities and he refers to this use as ‘utterance’ which he regards as a ‘real unit of speech communication’. Utterance is fundamentally linked to or in relation to something else – a response, i.e. from other people, ourselves, ‘otherness’. This relationship between utterance and response is a key feature of a dialogic view of the world. Further, whatever we say or write is always an expression of our position, giving voice to our ‘speaking consciousness’ (Holquist and Emerson 1981) which always occurs in some social context (Wertsch 1991). An utterance is itself a response to other utterances, ‘a link in very complexly organised chain’ (Bakhtin 1986), providing the potential for others to respond and takes such possibilities ‘into account’; this is referred to as its ‘addressivity’. Thus the crucial process of the making of meaning and the quality of that meaning, is the moment when at least two voices come into contact, although there can be no certainty as to the outcome of such contact. As the social constructionist writer Ken Gergen (1995) would suggest, meaning is made by the mutual co-ordination of utterance and supplement and a failure to find co-ordination is a failure to find meaning:

‘If others do not recognisably treat one’s utterance as meaningful, if they fail to co-ordinate themselves around such offerings, one is reduced to nonsense.’

(Gergen p.37)

In our analysis of action learning, we found that many participants claimed a degree of isolation in current roles, that they were ‘lonely at the top of their small businesses’. In addition, there was much talk of being ‘out of their depth at times’ and ‘feeling stressed’ as a result of responsibilities faced. Such features are not untypical of SME manager’s talk and were a key element for the meaning and sense of action learning in the first stages of set formation. The sets found life on the basis of being able to give expression to participants’ feelings and emotions about business and personal life. As Bakhtin (1993) would see it, such utterances in the ‘once-occurrent event of Being’ is something that is ‘actually and inescapably

accomplished...affirmed in an emotional-volitional manner' (p.13). One learner talks of the practice of verbally 'unpacking':

It's one of those things that you're aware (of) in the background that's an issue that you have to address but ... because it might be painful or might be difficult, you prefer not to think about it too much ... I hadn't unpacked it in anywhere near the depth in terms of, out loud anyway, to the depth that I was able to do whilst I was in the group.

Where success, in these terms, is achieved, there is a process of unification and centralisation. Bakhtin (1981) refers to the idea of a unitary language', the purpose of which is 'to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world' (p.270). In such circumstances, unification and centralization are achieved through the power of 'centripetal forces of language' which further produce what is deemed to be 'correct language' and a system of 'norms' that advance official recognition and a particular 'world view'. The sets we examined nearly all claimed high commitment to the process involving trust, openness and strong feeling of a bond among set members. Thus in one set, a manager claims her feeling of 'an emotional attachment to the group'; in another the process creates a 'strong commitment'. There was also much evidence of successful blending, growing confidence and willingness to bring issues of greater challenge:

This action learning group certainly has surprised me in the way in which all of a sudden you are ... baring your soul to complete strangers ... I really don't know how that works, whether it's just the fact that a) you don't know people and there's nothing to lose and b) you having committed yourself to the group, there obviously are ground rules of confidentiality and so on which you'd expect in that kind of a group and ... the dynamic of the particular group that I'm in, there seemed to be a high level of trust from the word go'.

Some action learning sets did not achieve such a high level of trust. Some found it very difficult to develop successfully whether through a failure to establish a social

milieu for the blend of utterance and voice to work or emotional threat that was felt. There was indeed evidence that participants left the set because of this failure, preferring to categorise their set as 'talking shops'. However, this could also be an indication of an individual's proclivity (or lack of it) to engage with others in the group setting and may well be a behaviour that has been developed through harsh experience:

'(normally) people don't share their information, well you can't believe what people tell you, you don't believe what your staff tell you, you don't believe what your customers tell you, that sounds harsh but they've usually got an angle on it'.

Participative Thinking

In all sets, we found evidence of the need to find what was often referred to as the 'common ground' and this was achieved even where participants were from different industries or had different backgrounds or gender. Certainly, there were some early benefits of similarity of culture and experience but crucial to set development was the degree to which participants could connect to the interests of each other in dialogue. The life of the set allowed the practice of what Bakhtin (1993) referred to as 'participative thinking' defined as

'Those who know how not to detach their performed act from its product but rather how to relate both of them to unitary and unique context of life and seek to determine them in that context as an indivisible unity.' (Bakhtin 1993, p.19)

It became apparent that the making of meaning, so crucial to the value and survival of the set, in several cases beyond the funding for the project., required a flesh-and-blood, embodied participation which provide the 'organic wovenness' in a shared world:

‘only the other human being is experienced by me as connatural with the outside world and thus can be woven into that world and rendered concordant with it’.

(Bakhtin 1990, p.40)

Bakhtin also refers to this phenomena as the ‘language collective’ (Bakhtin; 1996:68) and it was evident from our findings that certain sets had an identifiable method of discourse which played a significant role in setting a tone for the group, putting learners on an equal footing rather than creating hierarchies within them. The fact that everyone had an initial and sometimes ongoing discomfort with the language made a significant contribution to learning. This discomfort came from a heightened consciousness of using new and unfamiliar language and particularly from new ways of phrasing questions in order to make them insightful.

Theoreticism v. Presence

A pillar of Revans’ approach to action learning, and one which has for a long time created doubts about its status in the academic world, is the expression of a learning statement as $L = P + Q$ with prominence given to Questioning Insight but also standing for Quandary, Quiz and Query (Revans 1998). By contrast, there is less attention given to Programme Knowledge/Instruction and even dismissal as Platitude, Package and, our favourite, Poppycock. Ever since, debates have raged with the action learning world about the working of P and Q. For example, some would argue that there needs to be a minimum of P just to initiate action learning (See Sutton 1997). However, most would highlight the greater value of Q through questions and reflection. Bakhtin (1993) too had doubts about the abstraction of theory to our ‘unique Being in which we live and die’ (p.8). He points to the impossibility of living within a theoretical world; that is, theoreticism offered at a distance by others can so easily become ‘incapable of determining an answerable act/deed’. Indeed, as suggested by Bakhtin (1993), ‘All attempts to force one’s way from inside the theoretical world and into actual Being-as-event are quite hopeless’ (p.12).

We found that the SME managers who participated in the programme seldom referenced outside criteria or generic ideas about management and leadership reflecting de-contextualised notions of what should be done. Bakhtin (1993) saw such notions as a conception of ‘the ought’ (p.4), which is based on a ‘misunderstanding’ that theory can provide the content for ‘the once occurrent event of being’.

In our data, it was almost always the case that questions and reflection were of most value and use. As one participant remarked,

*‘. there were certain questions which provoked in me a deeper reflection . .
it gave me an opportunity to examine all kinds of solutions that maybe I
might not have considered before . . .’*

Different types of question and their impact on discussion that followed are always a feature of good action learning. ‘Powerful questions’ were observed to stimulate reflection, raising doubts about surface understanding and helping participants to realise limitations of current approaches before arriving at a possibility of what to do next:

*‘I needed that extra chance to reflect in a neutral environment to actually get
me to the point of a decision.’*

We witnessed managers in the act of creating practical theories (Shotter, 1993, 1995; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003; Rae, 2004) whereby language is constitutive and formative rather than merely representational (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003). This concept of action learning as joint practical authoring has not gone unnoticed elsewhere (Pedler, 2003).

One of the learners that we encountered, explained how talking out loud contributed to the development of practical theories:

*‘I decided not to continue (with a project).I hadn’t decided really and as I was
talking it through and getting reactions ... I thought, I’ve made my mind up
here, haven’t I? I’ve worked this out for myself by having the opportunity to
verbalise it.’*

Others and Outsideness

Questioning is also a means of enabling participants to come to some understanding of self, enabled by the seeing of others. This highlights one of the most significant offerings of Bakhtin's dialogism, a process of 'creative understanding' (1986, p.7) where we can learn from others what we cannot see for ourselves. Bakhtin (1990) argues that we do have an awareness of how incomplete and unfinal our lives are, but we need others to see and understand that which we cannot. As Bakhtin so poetically explains:

"I cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift myself by my own hair" (p.55)

We therefore need others, who can see our 'exterior' which we cannot. Of course, it is also the case that we can see aspects of others that they cannot see. What I can see but you cannot is referred to by Bakhtin as your 'surplus of seeing' (Holquist 1990, p.36), a crucial ingredient that allows you (and me) to overcome blockages and constraints on understanding. This 'outsideness' is regarded by Bakhtin as a 'most powerful factor in understanding' (1986, p.7). Thus the 'dialogic encounter' between one person and others creates the possibility to 'surmount the closedness and one-sidedness' that exist in current understanding of problems. Within the dialogic process, it becomes possible to 'raise new questions' which a person could 'not raise itself' and in response to such questions, 'new aspects and new semantic depths' are revealed. Thus, through questions in the sets we evaluated, it was common to hear such comments as being able to become aware of their own 'stupidity' or 'limitations', but also the 'significant realizations' of new possibilities:

It's almost the realisation that I'm sat here saying this and I'm not doing anything about it ... and there are people there, you're being witnessed in your own stupidity and I think there is a responsibility if people are prepared to care about it and spend time talking about it, you can't not do anything about it, I mean there is a mutual responsibility within the group.'

Voices

While the set is a primary context for action learning, all participants have lives outside the set and with such lives are the values and history which provide resources for talk in the present. This ‘extraverbal context of reality’ (Bakhtin 1986) underpins utterances as an expression of motives and interests. Thus speakers at set meetings are not initiators, they are not ‘the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe’ (p.69). Instead there is need to consider ‘an utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication’ (1986, p.84). As individuals interact with others and the world, through such interaction, they acquire different ways of talking, drawing on the resources of a social language which provide pattern and order to the way utterances are produced. Thus whenever we speak, write or engage in any act of meaning, we are using a social language that is specific to a group or community at a particular time. To this extent, we engage in ‘ventriloquation’ (Bakhtin, 1981), where one voice (the voice of a social language) speaks through another (ours), although our intentions can make the words of others ‘one’s own’ (p.294). Thus, individual existence is inherently multi-voiced, a dialogic interplay of different voices drawn from a variety of social languages:

‘The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it with his own semantic and expressive intention.’
(Bakhtin 1981, p.293-294)

In the context of ‘voice, one learner spoke to us of how she realised the power of silence in the action learning context and how she consciously changed her ‘voice’ in this setting:

‘I’m a big mouth, I’m always in there, I want to talk, I want everyone to hear what I’ve got to say and action learning made me just shut up completely and stop and listen and not say anything or ask any questions until I’d really thought

through what on earth was going on here and I think the group's response to me was, gosh well she's somebody that doesn't really say much but when she does it's really considered and it's a very good question and that's something that I've really been sorely lacking before...it would be very easy to slip into typical management mode with everyone shouting to get their voice heard.'

Coming Down to Earth

The interplay between voices can produce a struggle within individual consciousness, an 'internally persuasive discourse' that can be both creative but also constraining by producing versions of understanding that can topple over into a form of 'dominance'. Bakhtin (1984) also refers to the idea of a 'monologic model of the world'. Such a model provides 'official' versions of what is true and how such truth is to be utilised and these become taken-for-granted. These are the source of many of the difficulties faced by participants in action learning. In such circumstances, and given the concern in action learning for problems that do not have ready-made answers (Morris, 1997), the dual aspects of support and challenge are usually seen as central to the working of a set (McGill and Brockbank 2004). Not surprisingly, this was also one of the key findings in our evaluation where through challenging questions, set members could recognise inadequacies and, in some cases, dramatically and powerfully change their approaches. However, it may still be the case that set members believe they are seeking 'the True Word' (Bakhtin 1981, p.271) as a lofty ideal and this may prevent the disturbance from dominant thought. Such is the attraction of the idea of a 'theoretically valid judgement' (Bakhtin 1993) which is sensible and appears, 'determined, predetermined, bygone, and finished.' (p.9), that something more radical is needed to bring managers back down to earth. This is perhaps a space for Bakhtin's notion of Carnival.

Emerson (1997), one of the key commentators in the West on Bakhtin's work, considers Bakhtin's (1984a) exploration of Rabelais, the French writer and doctor of the 16th Century as appealing and accessible. Written partly as PhD thesis, but also probably to lampoon life under Soviet rule (Vice 1997), the book attempts to contrast 'folk festivities' with 'official and serious tones' (Bakhtin 1984a, p.4) in feudal life.

Since the book's publication in the West, some of the key ideas of Carnival, the carnivalesque and the grotesque have been seen as a stimulus to creativity.

The two central features of Carnival are 'folk festivities' and 'grotesque realism'. The first is composed of 'ritual spectacles' such as comic shows and pageants but also cursing, profaning, debasing and laughter, especially as exalted objects. With Carnival, serious life can be put to one side and everyone can adopt 'recreation' and 'non-canonical' talk. In this way, official versions can be reversed or combined unusually to reveal more amusing but also creative possibilities. One useful image is that of the banquet, where 'table talk' can be 'free and frank' in a non-hierarchical setting. Wine can be drunk to liberate participants from 'fear and sanctimonious' – something that does not seem to feature in action learning reports, but we suspect is likely to be present from time to time. The second feature, 'grotesque realism' works with images of 'food, drink, defecation and sexual life' to degrade the 'high, spiritual, ideal, abstract'. There is an exaggeration of the 'lower stratum of the body', not to dwell in the mire but to bring people 'down to earth' in order that something new can be born. It is a reminder that even in the midst of despair, there are always new beginnings (Gardiner 2000).

Now, we are not suggesting for the moment that these features of Carnival were explicitly evident in the sets we reviewed. Perhaps they were, but the etiquette of evaluation and the requirements of 'official' reporting to stakeholders was a sufficient constraint to prevent them surfacing.

Summary - Conceptualising action learning as a dialogic encounter

There has recently been some interest in the nature of action within action learning (Rooke *et al*, 2007) whether as part of the set or outside. From a Bakhtinian perspective such distinctions are artificial with respect to the concrete experience of life and our participation in a 'once-occurrent Being-as-event', our 'no-alibi' in a life that continuously proceeds as a series of acts and always in relation to others or an otherness. As Holquist (1990) states, 'so long as a human being *is*, he or she has no choice but to *act*' (p.152). What becomes crucial in events is the fundamental expression of positions though what is said, written or done as utterance which seeks a

response from others. The quality of meanings made and the understanding gained or generated, including the formation of ideas about what to do next, working on projects and reviewing what happened, are dependent on the dialogic co-ordination of utterance and response. While there are undoubtedly many creative and interesting variations within the action learning community, one thing becomes clear, and Bakhtin's work is a reminder of this, it is the making of meaning that is of most value to participants.

Like Revans, Bakhtin's work is highly sceptical of theoretical ideas, particularly those formed in abstraction from events in which we live. Instead, the pursuit of a truth or direction comes from within events which are valid because of the meaning made at that moment. In action learning, this is achieved principally through questions that provoke reflection in the 'presence' of participants; it is also within such moments that ideas and theories which are deemed to be practical can be presented (Mumford 2006). Questions are also crucial in overcoming blocks in understanding. Bakhtin's notion of 'outsideness' is a prompt that the questioning process enables participants to provide a crucial response that utilises their 'surplus of seeing' and this advances understanding and the move to possible actions beyond the set.

However expressed, utterance draws on the resources of language combined with the speaker's intent and evaluative position. There are no 'neutral words' (Bakhtin 1981, p.293), even if neutrality is the intent of the speaker since all language carries the 'taste' of social context. Much of this is beyond the immediate awareness of those who speak so it is incumbent upon set advisers to consider the working of social languages and ventriloquation in speakers and the limits set. A heightened consciousness of language and the nature of dialogic learning in action learning is not something that we should only share with set advisers. The power of a kind of reflection-in action(Schön, 1993) upon 'words in their speaking'(Shotter, 1993) as a learning device can prove to be helpful to learners who begin to taste the words as they are spoken. Set advisors who use the tactic of reflecting back verbatim contributions of set members are already encouraging this.

There is a danger that this concern for language could lead to a potentially destructive self consciousness whereby learners become afraid to speak which is why the establishment of trust and support in sets is so crucial. However, there is a fine line

between a self consciousness which limits or impedes learning and the construction of a self-affirming identity which may lead to increased self efficacy in a range of social settings (Bandura, 1977).. A high degree of self-efficacy allows a learner to visualise what success will look like. Self-efficacy is also closely linked to the idea of self-confidence which, according to Norman and Hyland (2003:262) has cognitive, emotional (affective) and performance components. The cognitive elements include self-belief and self-knowledge; the feelings generated by confidence are happiness and an absence of fear; performance is expressed through words such as ‘able’, ‘effective’ and ‘competent’.

In addition, through success and continued participation, sets can become the settings for what is right and true, an ‘official version’ of action learning at the expense of potentially more creative versions. Do action learning sets need ‘bringing down to earth’? Here, we would add our voices to the call for a more critical version of action learning (Rigg and Trehan 2004) and one which the work of Bakhtin provides a rich source of material to enable its achievement.

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